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ABSTRACT

Teachers of writing face an unusual situation in the classroom in that there is no mandated agenda for what students should write about in their courses. In teaching critical thinking skills or methods of argument in writing essays, eventually writing teachers must introduce controversial issues and a political agenda. In fact, teachers' very existence in the classroom betrays an agenda, representing the valuation of learning over material reward and making it difficult for them to convince students that they support unregulated profit, for example, or cutting educational funding to build more prisons. Since it is virtually impossible to remain neutral, instructors should decide what they represent and then set about advocating in a balanced, fair-minded way. However, teachers currently face a backlash against efforts to expose students to a wider variety of viewpoints, and some are intimidated into silence. There is nothing wrong with encouraging students to consider non-mainstream views of the society around them, preferably through the use of the Socratic method rather than lectures or browbeating. Teachers have the responsibility to determine their own individual agendas and then act upon them in the classroom. The question is not whether to advocate, but rather the nature of that advocacy and its extent. (BCY)

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Political Agendas in the Classroom

The classroom situation for teachers of writing is unusual in that there is no mandated agenda for what students should write about in connection with their courses. Some teachers ask students to write about personal experiences. No big controversy there. But usually at some point in the sequence of writing courses there comes the time to prepare students to write essays on subject content, which they will be repeatedly asked to do in many of their other college courses. Further, teaching the essay means teaching methods of argument and critical thinking, an increasingly popular mandate today for teachers of writing. Rather than hiding behind an established, traditional body of content as they might in a biology or philosophy course, instructors must choose material for reading, discussion and writing which furthers the goals of the whole enterprise.

If we are to teach critical thinking skills, then what are students going to apply their critical thinking skills to? Their own experiences? And if an essay can be defined as an argument, and if we are to teach methods of argument, then what are students going to argue about? Their summer vacation? Obviously, sooner or later, an agenda gets dragged, kicking and screaming, into the classroom. *Some* controversy, *some* issues, *some* debate, must be introduced.

There is already some solid precedent for exploring politically charged issues as a matter of routine in college classrooms. For example, I have taught using a text called Reading the Environment, a collection of essays edited by Melissa Walker (Norton) The entire text focuses on the predicament of our natural world due to the activities of humankind. No students objected when they purchased the text, nor when the quizzes and essays began in which they were directed to respond to those readings and the related issues. Now even though you will find some political opposition concerning environmental issues, for most people the environment has become a "safe" issue for the classroom. It is unlikely that Accuracy in Academia is going to come down on a professor, or that parents are going to complain to their school boards, if instructors ask students to read about, discuss, or write about the environment.

But what about the implications of what students learn? If we agree that people drive too much, or that we ought to manufacture electric cars, or that factories are spewing out too much smoke, then what logical conclusions and recommendations can students make in connection with environmental issues? And what stand should the instructor take concerning the political and economic implications of those conclusions? Witness the now-politicized debate over an international global warming agreement.

I would argue that there is an inescapable agenda in *any* writing classroom, due to the nature of the situation. In fact, isn't the occupation of the instructor in and of itself a statement implying a political agenda? While students may be planning to major in business, or premed, or prelaw, or a host of other lucrative and/or corporate professions, there stands our instructor, usually making no killing in the stock market, nor hauling in a large compensation package of salary, perks and stock options, in fact earning what has got to be one of the most undercompensated salaries in our society given the advanced degrees and years of on-the-job experience, in addition to virtually donating time on the side to advise clubs, serve on faculty committees, write recommendations for students and counsel them informally about their problems, their struggles, their futures. Remember, many attorneys think nothing of billing clients at the rate of $50 to $100 an hour to talk with them over the phone. Students are generally aware of this economic disparity between the amount of work their teachers do, and what they went through in terms of preparation, and what most other similarly trained professionals routinely EXPECT to make for all their troubles. It is a significant disparity.

Such disparities are significant enough, I am suggesting, that the very choice of teaching as a profession betrays an agenda. Clearly the teacher represents the valuation of learning over material reward, the life of the mind over financial aggrandizement. To have chosen the teaching profession means it will be hard to fool students into believing that you embrace a set of political values which support unregulated profit, anti-intellectualism, devaluing of schools in favor of constructing prisons and the like. Since it is virtually impossible to remain neutral in the classroom, the instructor should decide what she represents and then set about advocating in a balanced, fair-minded but coherent way.

One bedrock issue concerning agendas in the classroom is that of class in American society, a surprisingly invisible topic in most classrooms. Instructors can in fact get quite interesting essay responses by setting the topic, "What class are you in, and why?"

As John Alberti observes more generally in his article, "The Professor as role Model" in Maher and Tetreault's book Feminist Classroom, we encounter among students

> ...a certain middle-class blindness to class conflict vs. a desire among working-class students to achieve that middle-class blindness for themselves. (p.11)

A more humorous and light-hearted approach to question of class is undertaken by Paul Fusell in his classic, Class. He plays with the concepts of how to pigeonhole members of distinct socioeconomic classes by the cars they drive, clothing and other signs. His book relentlessly establishes that in our so-called democracy we not only have definite classes, but in fact we all readily recognize them.

Central to issues of class is students' confusion about what they are doing in college in the first place. It is all very well for instructors to pose as role models for the value of education, but what about the motives for most students to be sitting in front of us? Again, according to Maher and Tetreault,

> Our interviews with students gave us the impression that they did not in fact see themselves as part of a broader intellectual community, but rather as individual consumers of their education. (p.30)

Most instructors will readily recognize how accurate this finding is. If what teachers are offering cannot be linked to some tangible payoff in terms of grade point average or certification for some economic goal, then it is seen as a waste of time. Which of us has not lived through the depressing experience of winding up what we knew to be an inspired lecture, only to have the first question following it be, "Will we need to know this for the test?"

Yet in the face of what we know we need to do in terms of exposing students to a wider variety of viewpoints on many important issues, including that of the significance of education itself, we are today facing a strong backlash against any such efforts. The ideas that colleges are refuges for radicals, that multicultural education is somehow subversive or anti-American, that ESL courses undermine the American fabric and other patent nonsense nevertheless effectively intimidate some

instructors into silence. Yet the labels "Liberal" or "Radical" are relative and misleading. Concerns like world peace, preserving our environment, caring for our weakest and neediest, promoting quality universal education, and equality for women do not comprise a "liberal" agenda, yet affluent and powerful voices try to *position* them as such in the public mind. Advocating reasonable societal goals equals providing an alternative view for students to consider. Certainly in Orange County, California, they are quite familiar with the viewpoints of the powerful and affluent already.

Even if we choose to remain silent, that very silence will inevitably represent something to students. To have "no agenda" is to participate in educational hierarchy without critiquing it or commenting upon it. Universities in particular include parts of their operations that should be considered by everyone involved in the enterprise, especially those bright students who will finish their degrees and face career choices. The University of California at Berkeley is associated with Laurence Livermore Labs, for example, a weapons research facility. UC Irvine incorporates arrangements like the Rockwell Engineering building, which private corporations construct at their expense and then lease to the university where their projects are then carried out via the relatively inexpensive intellectual labor of university professors and graduate students. Building a better society means raising the consciousness of our students and exercising concern over where they sell their services.

There is nothing wrong with encouraging students to consider non-mainstream views of the society around them. This need not be done by lecturing on one's favorite hobby-horse, or by browbeating students to accept the teacher's views. The Socratic method is arguably more effective. As Virginia Anderson points out in her article from the May *CCC,* we need to approach students at the levels of their *definitions* and *assumptions*. What is their fundamental concept of the nature of the world we live in? Their concept of legitimate authority? Their apprehension of how truth is constructed? Their apprehension of the nature of fact? As Anderson recommends, "Ask students to locate apparently contradictory factual arguments, and then investigate the source of the contradiction." Consider, for example, the following question exploring gender issues surrounding Hilary Clinton:

John F. Kennedy appointed his brother Robert to the post of Attorney General of the United States. The public at large, the press, and commentators of the day voiced no particular concerns with the appointment. Hilary Clinton, a trained attorney just like Bobby Kennedy, in this case the President's wife rather than his

brother, was appointed to head up a *temporary* commission to reorganize U. S. health care. Ask students to account for the tremendous furor and backlash which followed.

We ought to encourage our students to question the nature and consequences, both domestically and internationally, of our contemporary arrangements of corporate power and our nation's place in the world. It is our responsibility as caretakers of the future, insofar as teachers can shape the future, to decide what our individual agendas are and then to act upon them. The question is not whether to advocate or not, but rather the nature and extent of our advocacy.

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